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Exercises on Overcoming Perfectionist Tendencies

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Abstract

In my latest series, I investigate my neurotic perfectionist tendency through repetition of phrases that I understand to be true in my head, but have a problem with accepting it in my heart. This way, I am studying my personal biases and the way I perceive the world in order to break free from unwanted behaviors and process negative emotions. Louise Bourgeois is a historical precedence to my practice as whole, while the series functions similarly to Yayoi Kusama's dot and net paintings—a psychological portrait achieved through continuous repetition of a few elements.

Introduction – a.k.a. “Mr. Nice Guy”

Ever since I was a little boy, the skill of being able to maintain good relationships with others stood out to me as an important challenge that needed to be addressed. I have had the unique experience of growing up amidst several different cultures—I was born in South Korea, but I have also lived in Panama, Brazil, Italy, United Kingdom, and the United States. During the first twenty years of my life, our family moved to a different country every one to four years due to my father’s job as an international marketing expert for Samsung electronics during the 80s and 90s where Samsung was still a newcomer in the international household electronics market. This experience has taught me from a relatively young age that people from different cultures have fundamental differences in their outlook of the world. I learned to not make any hasty assumptions from erratic behaviors that were unfamiliar to me. I learned to observe first and then slowly integrate myself into the given culture, trying to be respectful of their established customs in recognition of my status as a “visitor” to their culture. I began to see that perhaps because of my deep concerns for possibly offending someone due to cultural differences, I grew up to be a relatively likeable guy who was usually considered to be very nice. And I liked being nice to people. I thought of it as a positive trait of mine and tried to expand upon it. I wanted to be the nicest person I could possibly be—what could possibly go wrong with such a benign goal?

This plan, however, came to an abrupt halt in the summer of 2006 when I was diagnosed with chronic depression. While I still maintained good relations with people, and while I was still quite happy to give help to others, I was becoming more and more so unmotivated to take care of myself. I began to sense something paradoxical about myself as

people around me began to express concerns that I was neglecting my own personal responsibilities, and that it was baffling that I still rarely refused to help others. Surely, that I value the needs of others over the needs of mine was an admirable trait, but what does it mean when I apply this concept to the point of slowly destroying myself? I felt like I had somehow lived a lie, and that something was deeply wrong, leading me to fall ever so deeper into the seemingly never-ending sink hole that was depression.

I was extremely fortunate, however, to have met a therapist in South Korea that was able to help me recover from what I considered to be for a long time an irrecoverable state. I learned that first and foremost, I needed to learn how to help myself in order to be able to help others. I needed to learn to be able to love myself to be able to truly love others. I realized that I had a lot of repressed negative emotions from the past that I failed to process that was clouding my perception of reality today. Perhaps the most important thing I learned through psychotherapy was that suppressing and avoiding negative emotions only makes things worse. So in order to treat my symptoms, I had to learn how to re-experience those emotions again so that I could finally process them and let them dissipate. After four years of intensive psychotherapy treatment, I was dumbfounded to find myself with such a drastically different point of view on how I perceived the world. The world I was in was not a living hell anymore—neither benign or malign, it was simply livable. Without a doubt, it was the most beautiful realization that I had experienced in my life so far.



Figure 1. Käthe Kollwitz, *The Grieving Parents*, 1932

Therapy and Art – Historical Precedents

With the advent of psychoanalysis led by Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century, the field of arts became rife with artists exploring human emotions and the subconscious. This is most noticeable in the Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist movements that were essentially practices derived from the developments made in the field of psychoanalysis as images began to reflect the interior world as opposed to external world (Adams 11). Paul Klee referred to his practice as “taking the line out for a walk,” (de Zegher 38) which was a conscious attempt to allow the process of making to tap into one’s subconscious. Guy Debord pioneered the field of psychogeography, a practice which explored the relationship between the human subconscious and the geographical locations around us with an emphasis on urban environments.

Art practice as a reaction to human pain and suffering became an important theme in the twentieth century as well, which was largely propelled by the events of the world wars. Käthe Kollwitz dedicated her life's work in addressing the tragedies of war, where she lost her youngest son and a grandson. She famously stated that "I would like to exert influence in these times when human being are so perplexed and in need of help," also addressing issues of poverty, hunger, and the difficulties of the lives of the working class (Käthe Kollwitz Museum



Figure 2. Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 1997

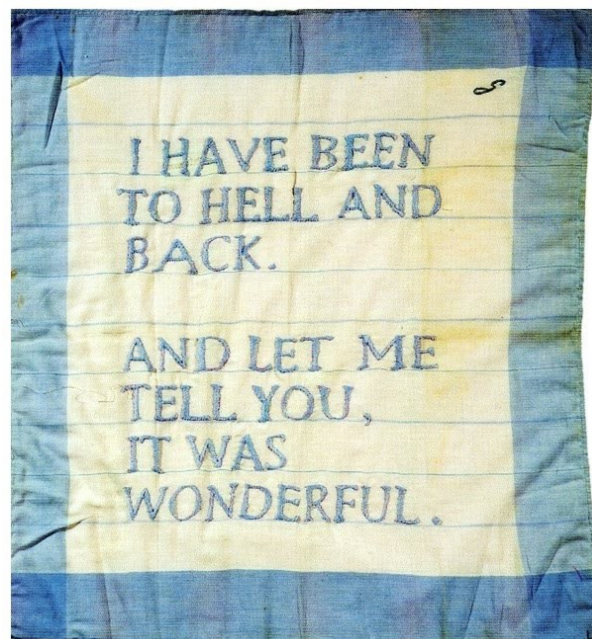


Figure 3. Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 1997

Köln). Yet, not many artists applied both concepts—the notion of investigation of the interior self and work as a reaction to emotional pain—simultaneously. Louise Bourgeois, however, was such an artist. Her practice revolved around careful examinations of deeply personal subject matter, many of which most people will find embarrassing to openly talk about. She described her practice as "I make works about certain things so that I don't have to think about them anymore" (Walker). Her genuine honesty that is found in her works allows them to become

visual manifestations of her inner world and emotions. When seen as a collective, they together paint an extensive, detailed psychological portrait in the scope that is rarely seen in the art world. Bourgeois' work is unique in that they possess an undeniable investigative property, where she willingly and ritualistically places herself amidst difficult memories and emotions. Psychotherapy sessions essentially consist of careful examinations and evaluations of the current symptoms and attempts to understand why such things are the way they are. A common misunderstanding among many is that time heals every wound. Emotional wounds don't just simply disappear with time—they must be properly processed, investigated, and understood in order to fully heal. Bourgeois knew that in order to be free of emotional pain, one must address and re-address them until they become properly digested.

***self portrait* – A Beginning**

My art practice essentially follows the legacy of personal emotional investigation of Louise Bourgeois. Inspired by my experience with psychological therapy, I openly investigate my own personal short-comings through the act of making. A piece I made in 2014, titled *self portrait*, demonstrates my practice in a simple yet direct manner. I was born without an index finger on my right hand, along with a thumb and a pinky with joints that did not function. The idea for this painting came from the realization that if I don't make a big deal out of my disabled hand, others don't make a big deal out of it either. By painting my right hand as detailed and as objective as I could, I re-examined the intricacies of my physical disability, reminding myself that the pain I thought to have originated from my disability was, in actuality, caused by my

misguided perception of my hand. This piece was founded upon a realization that I had made beforehand, which in effect, means that I made work that simply reinforces an observation that I had made before I started the work. In my experience, the process of therapy came in little bursts of epiphanies—realizations that allowed me to better understand myself and the world around me. In my most recent project, titled *Exercises in Overcoming Perfectionist Tendencies*, I attempted to document the entire process of tackling a particular issue from beginning to end, in hopes of capturing the moment I make a significant realization and articulating the process of my investigation.



Figure 4. Jake Yoo, *self portrait*, 2014

Exercises on Overcoming Perfectionist Tendencies – Part 1: The Search

Perfectionism has a curious reputation for being a positive attribute to a person. Though it may seem on the surface that the person has very high standards that fuels excellence in his or her field of work, for neurotic perfectionists, this comes at a significant price of psychological and emotional fragility. This is the case for myself, as some of the most difficult moments in my life comes from a deeply habitual, neurotic form of perfectionism. Yet during my therapy sessions with Dr. Choi, I wasn't able to fully address this issue due to the presence of other more pressing issues at the time. By starting at ground zero, it was my intention to emphasize

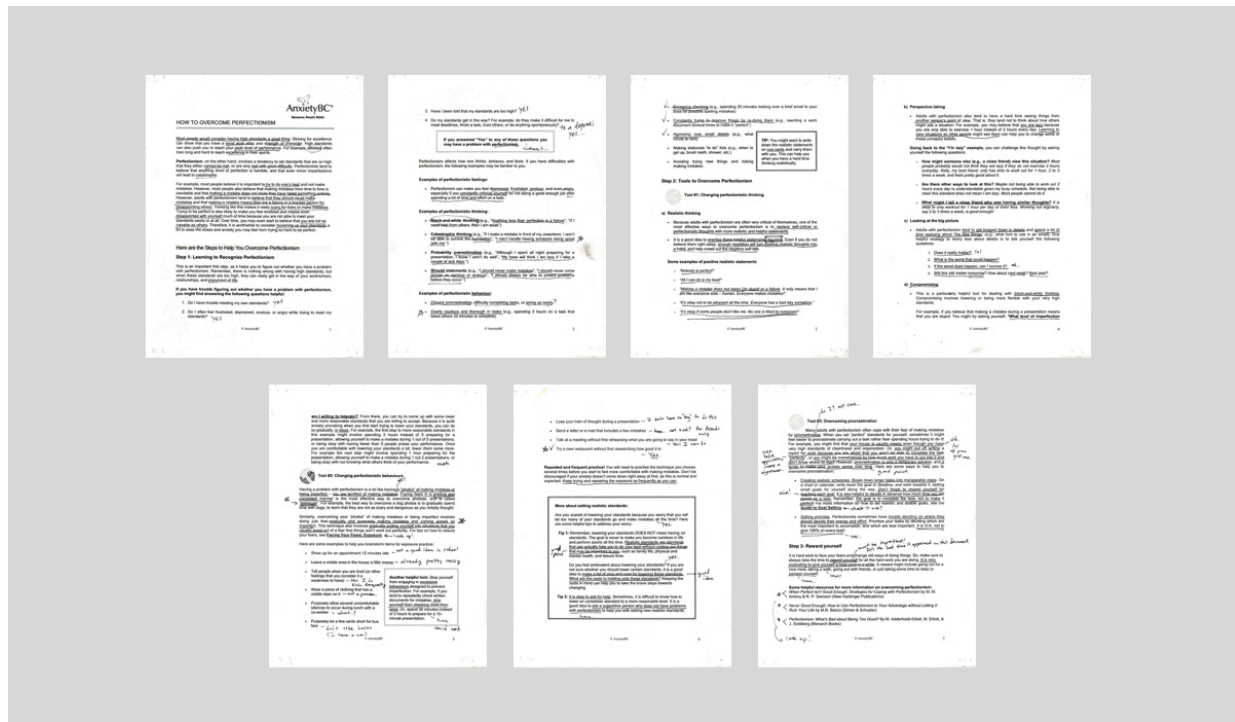


Figure 5. Jake Yoo, *Introduction*, 2016

the investigative approach to my work and capture the struggle of trying to better understand issues that are recurring in my life.

The first piece of the series, *Introduction*, marks the beginning of my investigation. Through a Google search on “how to overcome perfectionism,” I found a document that contained some suggestions on how to approach this issue. I printed it out and started to take notes on the document. Among various advices, a particular phrase stuck with me: Making a mistake does not mean I’m stupid or a failure. Initially I wasn’t sure why I was so drawn to this phrase, but it felt like a worthy place to start my investigation. I embraced the idea of positive reinforcement through continuous repetition and proceeded to work on my next piece.

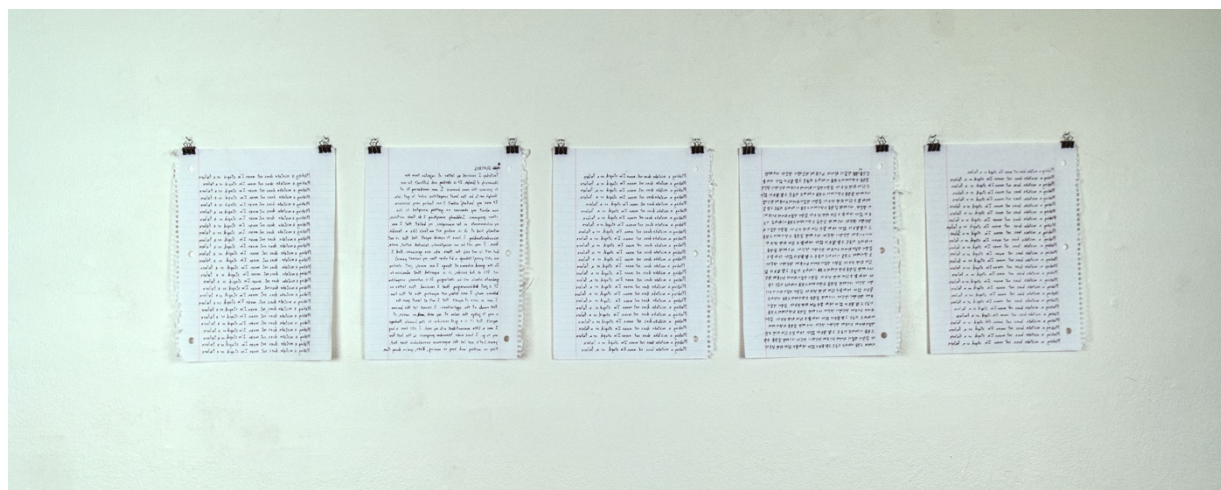


Figure 6. Jake Yoo, *Untitled*, 2016

As a way to stay true to the activity of investigation, I decided to repeatedly write this phrase where I would naturally write—in my notebook. However, I soon realized the mundaneness of the activity that I decided to engage myself with, and opted to make the activity more interesting for me by writing in mirror writing. Practicing to write in mirror writing had some interesting correlations to my investigation of this phrase. For one, it reinforced the idea of looking into oneself, as the writing looks as if it were seen through a reflection of a mirror. Secondly, to try to write in mirror writing was a new skill that required practice, and I was interested in the prospect that I will be making mistakes during the process of repeatedly writing a phrase that kept reinforcing that it was ok to make mistakes. When the piece was finally hung on the wall, I noticed that the materiality of the piece had a particular attitude to it. To me, *Untitled* had a quiet, conformed, an almost shy personality. I wondered if I approached my self-imposed activity with materials that had a completely different presence I could perhaps finally understand what I was looking for.

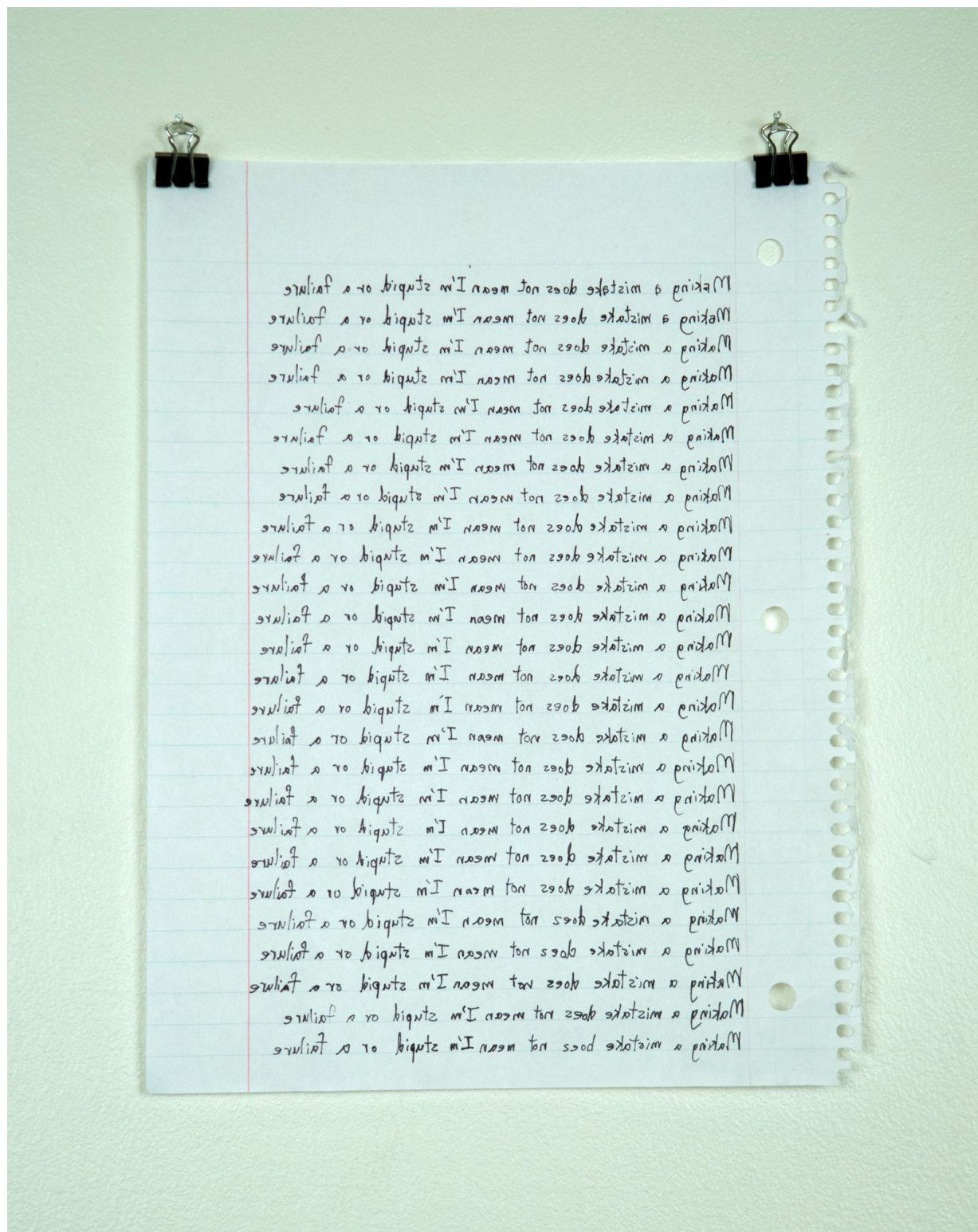


Figure 7. Jake Yoo, *Untitled*, detail

In response to *Untitled*, I switched my medium from notebooks and pen to canvas and paint, and began to infuse the visuals with connections that could perhaps help me in my search. I realized that the repetition of the phrase was functioning like a personal mantra and incorporated the circular pattern that traditional visuals mantras often possessed. Perhaps out of desperation, infusing my work with a little bit of superstition seemed like a good idea at the time, as I saw similarities between my hopeful desire to overcome perfectionism with the way Koreans utilized a *Boo-juk*, a Korean talisman, in order to bring good luck in difficult situations. So I incorporated the color scheme of a *Boo-juk* in my next painting, using yellow as the background, which traditionally is considered as a color that evil spirits have a dislike for, and red for the writing, which symbolizes blood, life, and prosperity. Just like how a *Boo-juk* is made, I wrote the writings in one sitting, without consideration of whether my writing was

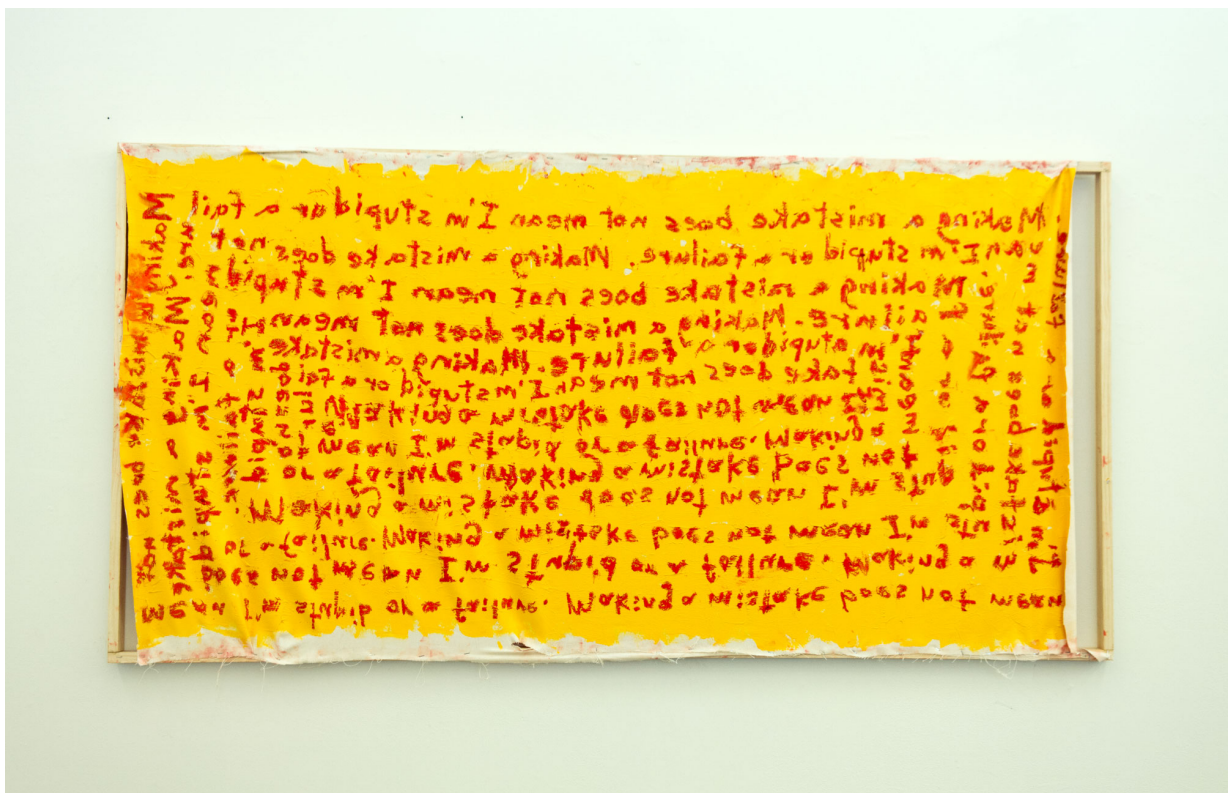


Figure 8. Jake Yoo, *Going down the rabbit hole (Mantra ver. 1)*, 2016

legible of not. Something interesting happened when I finished the painting and tried to stretch it on a wooden frame. I had miscalculated the size I needed for the frame and ended up making it too big. One of the sides didn't even match in length, creating a crooked frame. As a way to respect the idea of being ok to make mistakes, however, I again decided to embrace the mistakes and forcefully stretched my canvas on the oversized frame. This resulted in a different rendition of the same activity of my previous works, but this time the work was loud, obnoxious, and maybe even a little ugly. I soon noticed that the writings I did on this piece had several mistakes on it due to the mirror writing process and decided to make another piece that placed my mistakes up on a pedestal, so to speak. I faithfully transcribed what was written on *Going down the rabbit hole (Mantra ver. 1)*, including all the mistakes, and printed in out and framed it for good measure.

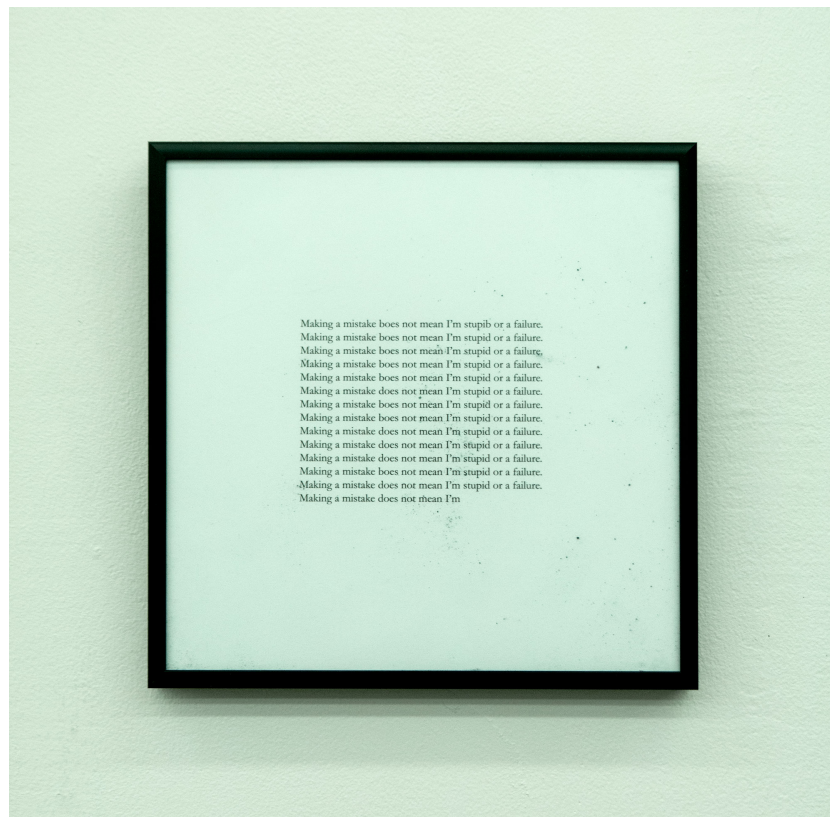


Figure 9. Jake Yoo, *Untitled (Mantra ver. 2)*, 2016

After having made *Untitled (Mantra ver. 2)*, I began to understand what I was doing to myself. By accentuating and treasuring my mistakes, I realized that I was stimulating myself by doing exactly what I am afraid of—making mistakes. In fact, I realized that all the pieces that I have worked on until now, they all felt like mistakes—incomplete, mediocre work that seemingly didn't require much effort. The more I worked on these pieces, I realized that my sense of anxiety was growing, and the phrase "Making a mistake does not mean I'm stupid or a failure" felt more and more so paradoxical. This phrase is undeniably true—no one will debate against this—but if so, why then do I still feel stupid and why do I still feel like a failure? This was the essence of why I had a neurotic perfectionist tendency: every time I make a mistake, or rather, when I perceive as I had made a mistake, I feel incredibly stupid and I feel like a failure. It was as if my humanistic value, my self-esteem, depended on me being successful in what I do. Whenever I perceived myself as performing poorly, I felt as if I became lesser of a person—someone worthy of receiving great contempt from others. Then I remembered something Dr. Choi had told me around the time my therapy for depression was nearing the end.

"Jake, you are a jewel. And in fact, every person is a jewel—once you get to know them."

To me, Dr. Choi was speaking of the intrinsic human value. What is it that makes a person valuable? Is it the great achievements they make during their life-time? Fame? Glory? Wealth? No. None of these things could possibly determine the value of an individual. Instead, it struck me that the very fact that we are alive is perhaps that most significant achievement that we can make in our lifetime. How can any human achievement possibly be comparable to the miracle that is life?

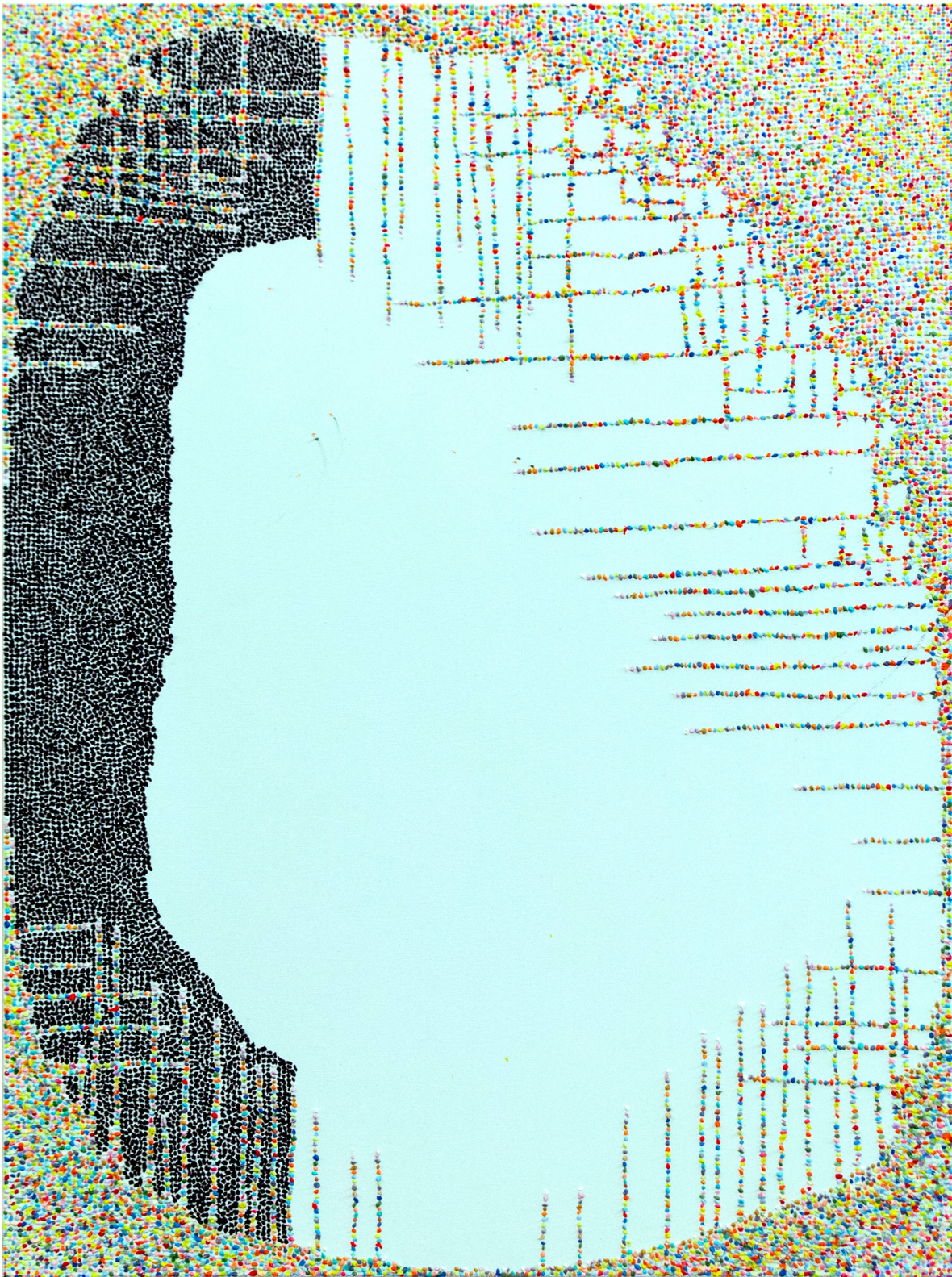


Figure 10. Jake Yoo, *Making a mistake does not mean I'm stupid or a failure*, 2016

Exercises on Overcoming Perfectionist Tendencies – Part 2: The Remedy

That every human is a jewel struck me as an important fact that I felt like I needed to remember. I decided to start a painting that could help me do that. It needed to be arduous and time consuming so that I could take my time to reflect upon it and engrave it in my system. I began painting little dots of various brilliant, jewel-like colors. However, I soon noticed that I had an impulse to reflect on my own internal crisis in trying to understand this truth. The colors seemed too bright, too positive, too innocent. Despite my intentions of keeping the colors the way they were, I noticed that I had already reacted to it. The more I worked on this piece, the colors were progressively getting muddier and darker. I wondered what this meant—*was this another mistake?* I was at a point where I had to consider now how this series have been functioning as an art piece. I found some similarities in the work of Yayoi Kusama—her dots and



Figure 11. Yayoi Kusama, *The Obliteration Room*, 2011

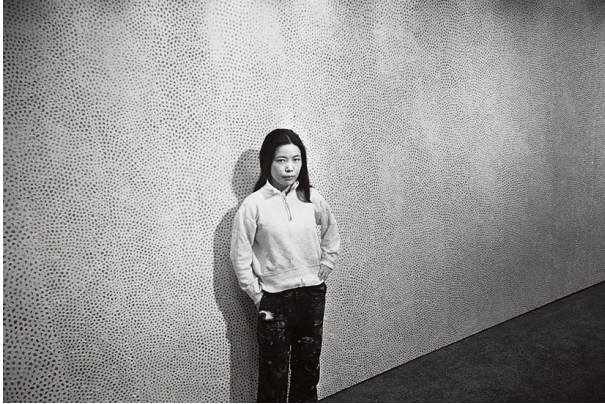


Figure 12. Yayoi Kusama in front of *Infinity Nets*, 1961



Figure 13. Yayoi Kusama working on *Infinity Nets*

the net paintings—with enough repetition of a certain action, the artist begins to imprint something of themselves in their work. From the very beginning of this series, repetition has been a very important aspect of my work. I was repeating phrases that felt paradoxical to me as a way to investigate the reasons behind why I had issues with truths that were seemingly undebatable. The dots were essentially functioning in a similar fashion to the written phrases—both the dots and the phrases were used to search for the exact point in which I had a problem with the given fact. This way, I was placing inquiries on how I was perceiving the world and recording my frustrations and dilemmas in trying to understand these truths. Like Louise Bourgeois, in the end, my pieces were functioning as psychological portraits of myself.

Conclusion – Starting from the individual and extending into the collective

I can testify from experience that depression is a disorder that can in fact be cured. Yet the stigma related to psychological therapy exists to this day, as the population with severe mental health problems is ever increasing, and too many are still hesitant to seek out professional help. One of the things I realized after four years of intensive therapy sessions was

that issues related mental health are in fact all around us. Doctor Dong-shik Rhee infamously stated that every person is in fact a “patient” in the sense that no one is ever completely free from the burdens of psychological issues. It is not a question of existence, but rather, that of the degree in which the psychological issue is affecting the person in their day-to-day lives (Rhee 66). So, one would feel compelled to seek professional help only when things get too out of hand. But how can one gauge when things are getting too out of hand? Must we all experience the mental equivalent of a car crash to finally realize that we must seek help? A common reality that we globally share in our contemporary societies is that the infrastructure for treating and sustaining healthy emotional and psychological states is severely lacking. We as a society must learn how to better treat those with emotional and mental difficulties, and re-evaluate our priorities so as to better educate the population on issues related to emotional health and maturity.

As cultural integration and globalization continues, to be able to reconcile the differences between cultures is increasingly becoming an urgent task in our society. Our differences are fundamental, and in order to successfully integrate into a harmonious globalized society, we must learn how to reliably cultivate wisdom and empathy within the individuals of our communities. We must learn how to properly process our negative emotions and use it as a resource in which we able to develop a better understanding of ourselves, for it is by embracing and gaining a deeper understanding of our own selves that we will truly be able to understand and embrace those around us.

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